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## THE LOCAL DIVINITIES OF THE MODERN SEMITES.

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By PROFESSOR SAMUEL IVES CURTISS, PH.D., D.D.,  
Chicago Theological Seminary.

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AMONG most sects of Moslems and Christians, including Bedouins as well as Syrians, the worship of saints exists. In the popular imagination they exercise a power far above that of God; men fear lightly to break oaths made at their shrines, or to use obscene language (so prevalent in the East) when going into their presence.<sup>1</sup>

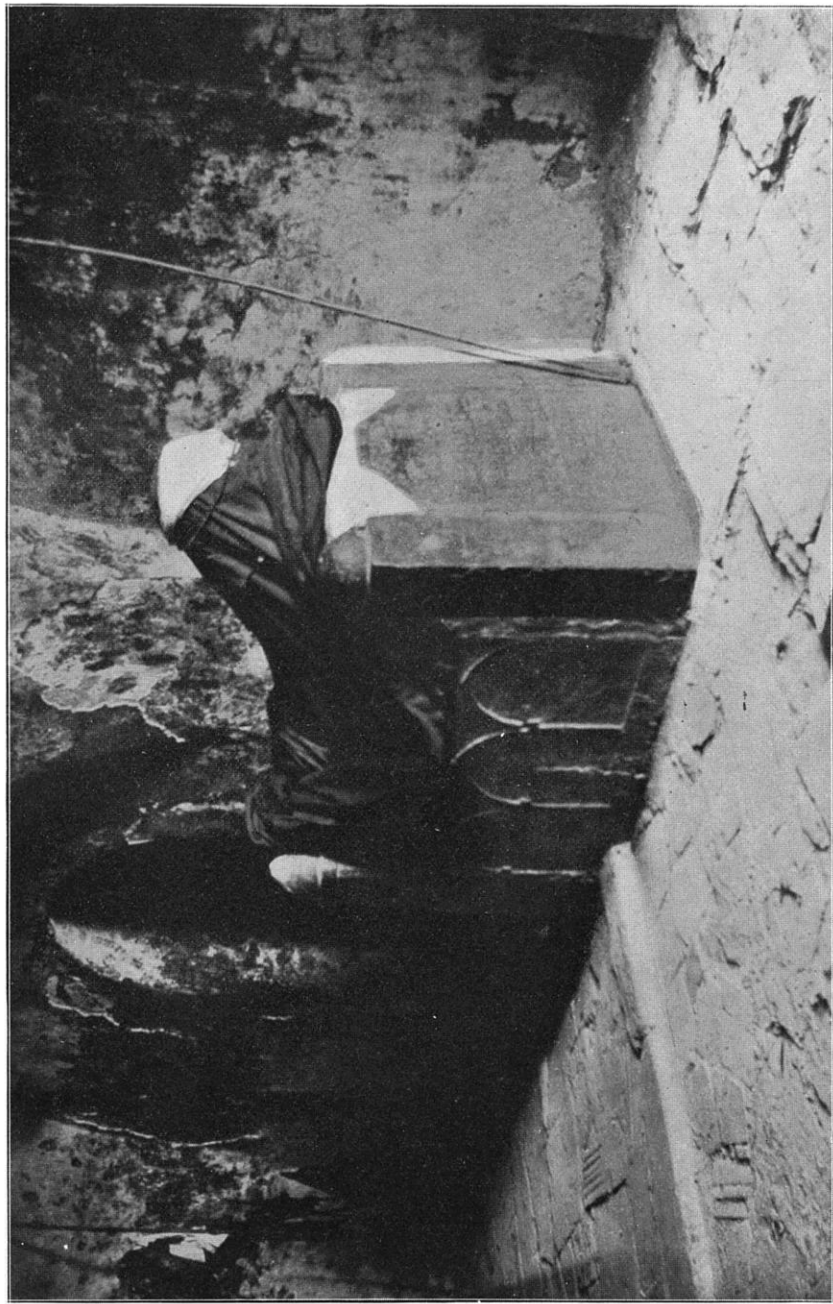
It is true that orthodox Moslems insist that the saints are only mediators, that the worshiper asks his weli to intercede for him with God;<sup>2</sup> but this is not the type of religion as it is found among the ignorant, whose usage corresponds most closely to that of antiquity. The antinomy between doctrine and practice came out in a conversation with a religious sheik, an orthodox Moslem at Nebk, in the Syrian desert, about vows, concerning which he said: "If a vow is made, it is made to God, not to the saint, but it is made by the grave of the saint, to honor him, and to please God. . . . However, a simple person would say that the vow was given to the weli, thus making him a lord, which is an error. As I am an educated person, I give you the right account."<sup>3</sup>

The general designation used among the Christians for these beings, who are practically treated as divine, is the Aramaic word *Mar*, "lord" or "saint," while that used among Moslems is *weli*, which signifies "protector," "patron," "nearest of kin." In the Arabic version (of the American Press at

<sup>1</sup> "They are very particular on the road [to the shrine] not to speak foul language" (*Journal*, XI, Behammra among the Nusairiyeh, summer of 1901).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. my article, "Ancient Shrines in Northern Syria," in the *Independent*, Vol. L, p. 1448: "God is almighty. . . . I ask the weli, and the weli asks God." The same idea was brought out in other interviews with the Moslems.

<sup>3</sup> *Journal*, X, Nebk, summer of 1901.



THE TRADITIONAL TOMB OF AARON ON MOUNT HOR.

Beirût) Job appeals to God, as his *weli*, to be his avenger,<sup>4</sup> and Ruth confides in Boaz as her *weli* or nearest of kin, who is under obligations by that relationship to marry her.<sup>5</sup>

In the Koran the term *weli* is used many times, both in the singular and plural. It is almost always translated by Professor Palmer as "patron." The singular is mostly applied to God. Thus we read: "God is the patron of those who believe,"<sup>6</sup> or "of the believers."<sup>7</sup> The taking of other patrons besides God is condemned in the strongest terms. There is no place in all this teaching for the worship of the *welis*, and there is good reason for the opposition of the Wahabites, the most orthodox sect of Islam, to their worship, who sought as resolutely to crush out the sacred shrines<sup>8</sup> as King Josiah attempted to stamp out the worship on the high places.<sup>9</sup> In the call to prayer we were told that *ulia*, the plural of *weli*, is used,<sup>10</sup> but this seems most unlikely, certainly in the sense of "patrons."

The term *Mar* is used among the Christians as a title; thus St. George is known in Syria as *Mar Jurjis*. But the Moslems designate their saints by the special term of *nebi*, "prophet," if they may be considered biblical characters, or as *sheik*, if they belong to post-biblical times. The term *weli* is general, and applies both to the saint and to his tomb.

These saints are really departed spirits, connected with some

<sup>4</sup> Job 19:25.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth 3:12. In both these passages *weli* is used in the Arabic version as the rendering of the Hebrew *goël*.

<sup>6</sup> 2:258.

<sup>7</sup> 3:61.

<sup>8</sup> BURCKHARDT, *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys* (London, 1830), pp. 280, 281: "The Wahabys declared that all men were equal in the eyes of God; that even the most virtuous could not intercede with him; and that it was consequently sinful to invoke departed saints, and to honor their mortal remains more than those of any other persons. Wherever the Wahabys carried their arms they destroyed all the domes and ornamented tombs; a circumstance which serves to inflame the fanaticism of their disciples, and to form a marked distinction between them and their opponents. . . . The destruction of cupolas and tombs of saints became the favorite taste of the Wahabys."

<sup>9</sup> 2 Kings 23:8-13.

<sup>10</sup> "In the regular call to prayer there is a mention of all the *ulia*—first the prophet, then all the other prophets, then the *ulia*" (*Journal*, XI, Mehardeh, summer of 1901).

particular shrines. These shrines have been chosen because the saints revealed themselves there in times past, and are now wont to reveal themselves there to those who seek their favor.

While our previous examination shows that the Semitic conception of God today degrades him,<sup>11</sup> that which we are about to make concerning the saint will prove that the saint is exalted to the place of deity, at least among the ignorant.

We must recognize a close connection between the ordinary spirit of the departed and that of the saint, who is supposed to possess superior sanctity and power. Indeed, we shall find that conceptions which might be held with respect to the disembodied spirit are held of the saint, and may be held of God.

Fraser has well said :

The notion of a man-god, or of a human being endowed with divine or supernatural powers, belongs essentially to that earlier period of religious history in which gods and men are still viewed as beings of much the same order, and before they are divided by the impassable gulf which to later thought opens out between them.<sup>12</sup>

Such a notion still exists among the most ignorant of the modern Semites, and the impassable gulf has not yet been fixed between them.

It is evident from an examination of the numerous passages in the Koran where the term *weli* is used as applicable to God that the praise of the *weli*, as saint, is contrary to the Koran<sup>13</sup> and to Moslem law.<sup>14</sup> But even good Moslems affirm that a man who does not believe in a *weli* does not believe in God.<sup>15</sup> There are also said to be ascriptions of praise rendered to the *welis* among the Nusairiyeh, a heretical sect, far beyond those rendered to God.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Cf. BIBLICAL WORLD, Vol. XIX, pp. 124, 125.

<sup>12</sup>*Golden Bough* (London, 1900), Vol. I, p. 130.

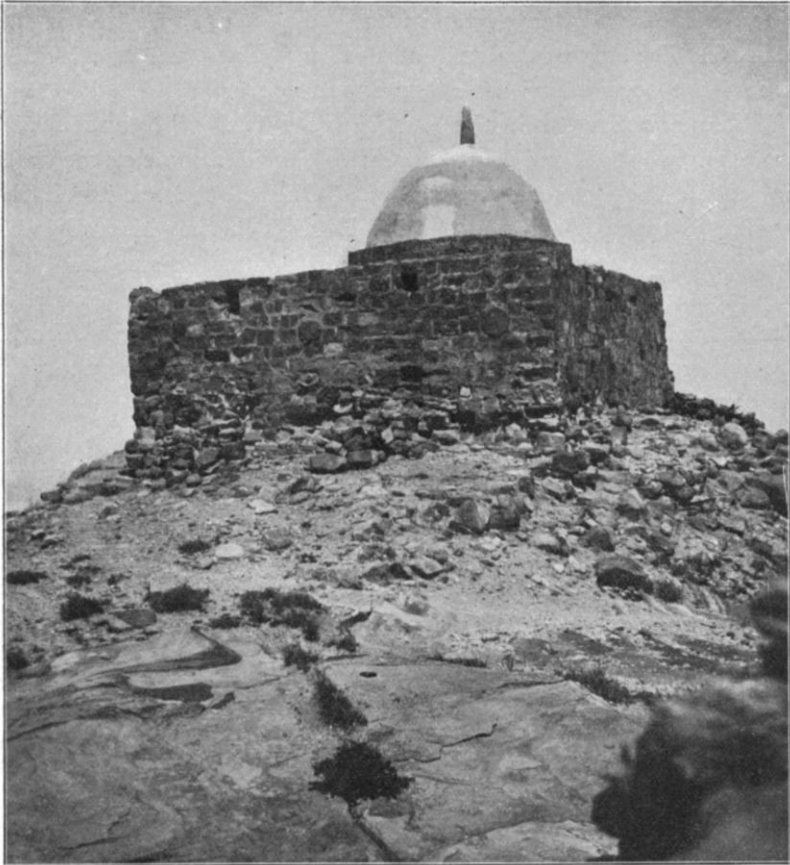
<sup>13</sup>See FLÜGEL, *Concordantiae Corani Arabicae* (Lipsiae, 1842), *sub voce*.

<sup>14</sup>*Journal*, Hama, summer of 1901: "There rises before the company, when they arrive at the shrine, one who recites a poem. The subject of the poem is praise to God, or the prophet, or the *weli*. The praise of the *weli* is a very prominent part of it. But this is all contrary to Mohammedan law." Cf. BURCKHARDT, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

<sup>15</sup>Declaration of a Moslem peasant (*Journal*, XI, Nebk).

<sup>16</sup>Rev. James S. Stewart, of Ladikiyeh, testifies: "I have read in their books [of the Nusairiyeh?] ascriptions of glory and praise greater than any they ascribe to God."

Every shrine, of whatever sort, theoretically presupposes a weli. Such a saint may have lived within the memory of the generation that does him honor. There may be many tales which have been preserved in regard to him, or he may be



SHRINE OF AARON ON MOUNT HOR.

a mythical character, about whom a profusion of folklore has sprung up. It may be that he has little objective existence in the thought of the people beyond his name and shrine. They can tell but little regarding his life and his achievements. Indeed, there is sometimes a clear indication of skepticism

on the part of the people with respect to the origin of such shrines.<sup>17</sup>

To the heated imaginations of some of their servants the saints appear in bodily form.<sup>18</sup> Theoretically they are worshiped in connection with the God of all the world; practically many people know no other god. In this respect the worship of the saints is like that of the ancient Baalim. They are the deities whom the people fear, love, serve, and adore.

Remembering that the saints are spirits who once lived on earth, we shall find it of interest to consider some of the ways in which they reveal themselves. One of the most famous shrines is that of Aaron on Mount Hor. Whether his body was ever buried on that height which tradition assigns to him is of no moment in this investigation. As will be seen from the following dialogue with Musa, an Arab guide at Petra, it will be evident that Aaron is thought of as having existence, and as coming to his shrine during two days of the week:

*Quest.* "Is there a yearly festival?"

*Ans.* "No."

*Quest.* "Why do the people visit the prophet's tomb?"

*Ans.* "Because he is a great prophet; out of honor to him."

*Quest.* "What benefits do they expect to receive from such a visit?"

*Ans.* "If anyone has a son or friend ill, he goes and asks the prophet to intercede for him [with God], and promises in case of recovery to visit the tomb once a year."

*Quest.* "Do they vow that they will give the prophet anything in case of recovery?"

*Ans.* "Yes. It is not necessary that they should go to the top of the mountain to make a vow. They may pile up a heap of stones anywhere in sight

<sup>17</sup> See *The Women of the Arabs*, by REV. H. H. JESSUP, D.D. (London, 1874), pp. 269-72.

<sup>18</sup> Sheik Yusef el-hagg, of Nebk, said with respect to the saint who has charge of the stream at Nebk, and whose name is Mohammed el-Ghuffary, that he appears in various forms, "sometimes as an old man, sometimes as a young man in white, but always in human form; some see him at night, others see him by day; some see him in dreams; only those who have the light in their hearts see him." Another Moslem, by the name of Abu Ali, from the same village, who at times works himself into a frenzy, and sometimes makes a frightful noise when engaged in prayer, testified: "I have seen his spirit, because I love the saint and he loves me. He appears to me by day and by night, like a middle-aged man, wearing a green robe. I speak to him and we converse together." (*Journal*, X, Nebk, summer of 1901.)



PLATFORM OF UMM SHAKAKIF.

of the mountain as a witness (*meshhad*).<sup>19</sup> They may kill the animal they have vowed anywhere."

*Quest.* "Do they consider the animals they have vowed, and which they eat, sacrifices?"

*Ans.* "Yes."

<sup>19</sup>These heaps of witness (*cf.* Gen. 31:48) are very common in sight of shrines which are difficult of access.



*Quest.* "How can they be sacrifices when they eat them? Does the prophet partake of them?"<sup>20</sup>

*Ans.* "The prophet is dead, how could he eat of them? We would not throw them away after we had killed them."<sup>21</sup>

*Quest.* "Is the prophet dead?"

*Ans.* "Prophets never die. The prophet [Aaron] is alive today. We ask him to intercede for us."

*Quest.* "Do the people ever make any use of the blood of the sacrifice?"

*Ans.* "No, they throw it away."

*Quest.* "Why do the people put *semn* [butter] in the lower room?"

*Ans.* "It is customary to have a lamp burning Thursdays and Fridays, so they use *semn* for this purpose."

*Quest.* "Why is the light burning only on Thursdays and Fridays?"

*Ans.* "Our books<sup>22</sup> say that the prophet comes only on Thursdays and Fridays. The rest of the time he is with his brother Moses, and with their friend [God]. He comes down only on these two days."<sup>23</sup>

The alleged birth-place of Abraham at Berzeh, near Damascus, affords Moslems a reason for seeking the patriarch, by vows and prayers, at this place of his revelation, since his mother is said to have given him birth in a hole of the rock. She was with him three days, and then, putting his finger in his mouth, left him. There he abode, according to the legend, seven years. The shrine, which affords a dwelling for the minister on the same court, is especially interesting because on a sheet of paper, posted on the wall, all visitors who are in trouble are invited to make known their sorrows to the weli: "Advice to people who visit this place, where is Abraham, father of Isaac, the sacrificed, the grandfather of the prophets: 'Come, tell him all your adversities and hardships, and he will help you.'"<sup>24</sup> It will be

<sup>20</sup> This question was asked to see whether there was any trace of the critical theory that God is the host at sacrificial meals. Musa did not seem to conceive of the prophet Aaron in any such capacity.

<sup>21</sup> This is certainly a very important statement in connection with the use made of the flesh in sacrifices, and would seem to indicate that the sacrifice does not consist in eating it.

<sup>22</sup> Unlettered Moslems frequently refer to their books for statements which they make. As they cannot read, the allusion to such books must be taken with a great deal of allowance. Friday is the Moslem Sunday, hence a favorite day for saints to visit their shrines.

<sup>23</sup> *Journal*, VIII, Petra, summer of 1901.

<sup>24</sup> This was translated by Rev. Anise Nasif Sellum, of Damascus, into Arab-English, which I have retained (*Journal*, XII, Berzeh, summer of 1901).

noticed that nothing is suggested as to his intercession with God for them. The people are bidden to come to him as the sole source of their comfort.

Of quite another sort is the weli at an ancient platform, surrounded by several acres of oak trees, known as the "Mother



SACRED TREES OF UMM SHAKAKIF.

of Pieces" (*Umm Shakakif*). It was my good fortune to learn the story of this shrine for the first time and in two forms: one in poetry, from the servant of another shrine<sup>25</sup> about an hour and a quarter south; the other in prose, from the servant of the shrine itself. Both are interesting specimens of folklore. I give the former here because briefer.

<sup>25</sup>*Journal*, X, Kursi el-Aqtab, summer of 1901.

The story goes that there were four maidens, each of whom was under the protection of a particular saint. The heroine of the shrine was known according to one story as 'Arja, or "the lame one;" according to the other, as Fatima. She was lame, blind of an eye, bald, poor, and almost naked. Accompanied by



GIRLS WITH WATER JARS.

her three friends she went to the fountain to draw water, where the four saints, the respective patrons of these girls, were seated. Each of 'Arja's companions let down her water jar, in turn, and it came up full of water, and each set out on her way home. When 'Arja had lowered her jar, instead of coming up brimming, she drew up only the handles. Her patron, whom she had served faithfully, had shattered it. Urged to desert him and choose another, she affirmed her unalterable fidelity to him.

Touched by her devotion, he bade her give him the handles. In a few moments she drew up her jar more beautiful than ever, full of water. On this the following dialogue took place :

Saint to 'Arja : "Go, join your companions."

'Arja : "I am your servant, you see I am lame." He healed her.

Saint : "Go, join your companions."

'Arja : "I am your servant, you see I am blind." He cured her.

Saint : "Go, join your companions."

'Arja : "I am your servant, you see I am bald." He gave her long hair.

Saint : "Go, join your companions."

'Arja : "I am your servant, you see I am naked." He clothed her.

Saint : "Go, join your companions."

'Arja : "I am your servant, you see I am poor."

Saint : "Raise up the carpet, and you will find silver and gold." She did so.

Thus through her faith and obedience a poor, blind, bald, and lame girl became the object of worship, and the place where she is reputed to be buried is still a place of blessing. Vows are made of jars of pottery which are broken on the ancient platform.

In direct contrast with the legends which have grown up around the "Mother of Pieces" is a Druse shrine, about two and a half hours west of Rasheya, known as Nebi Safa. While they say that the saint of this shrine is descended from Jacob, and that his people lived in the direction of Jerusalem and Hebron, they do not know how he came to be there, or to die there. "The honorable body is there, and the spirit is always to be found there. Any day that a man seeks him he will find him. It depends on his faith." The people charged with the care of the shrine could tell wonderful stories, indicating the exercise of supernatural powers, but could give no information shedding any real light on the history of the one exercising these powers.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Journal*, XIII, Nebi Safa, summer of 1901.

[To be completed in the next number.]